



Quality Afterschool Programs in the Best Interest of Students

By Melanie McClintock

Services for Arizona's children are under attack. In the past two years, the Arizona state legislature cut approximately \$300 million from the state's primary and secondary education budget causing school districts to lay off teachers, increase class sizes, and reduce or drop extracurricular activities that are vital to assuring our children's educational and developmental success.

Simultaneously, parents and employers expect schools to raise student performance scores as measured by the AIMS test, increase the state's 73.4 percent four-year graduation rate, and decrease the state's 6.8 percent dropout rate of students in the 9–12th grades. Currently, Arizona boasts the nation's second-fastest growing student population but ranks 43 in the U.S. on *Education Week's* overall "chance-for-success" index.

At the same time that state funding is declining, there are those who propose that the only way to improve Arizona's national education ranking is to increase the length of the school day and/or the school year. And while it is true that students are only in school 27 percent of the day, the demands of working parents require that their children be at school before the bell rings in the morning and remain at school long after the bell rings at the end of the day. As a result, schools and community-based providers began before and afterschool programs as a safe and nurturing place for children to be while their parents work instead of being home unsupervised.

According to *America After 3 p.m.*, at nationwide survey sponsored last year by the JC Penney Afterschool Fund, 16

percent of Arizona children, or 185,737, participate in organized afterschool programs, while 22 percent, or 252,557, are unsupervised and take care of themselves an average of nine hours per week. Thirty-four percent of Arizona children not in afterschool (32,913) would likely participate if an afterschool program was available in the community.

More than nine of every 10 Arizona adults agree that there should be "some type of organized activity or place for children and teens to go after school every day that provides opportunities to learn."

While quality afterschool, or out-of-school time, programs originated as safe places for our children once the final school-day bell rings, research now shows that quality afterschool programming has a strong and direct link to a child's overall developmental and academic success.

Research consistently shows that participation in quality afterschool programs results in improved school attendance, increased academic achievement in reading and math, higher levels of student engagement and motivation to learn, higher self-esteem, reduced delinquency and increased likelihood of high school graduation.

Specifically, the Promising Afterschool Programs Study of about 3,000 low-income, ethnically diverse elementary and middle school students showed that those who regularly attended high-quality programs over two years demonstrated gains of up to the 20th percentile in standardized math test scores compared with peers unsupervised during after school hours.

While no one argues that schools must remain focused on the mastery of students' skills, quality afterschool programs have the potential to do more than merely increase the amount of time for learning. Quality afterschool programs reaffirm what is taught in the classroom at the same time they maximize children's different styles of learning and create environments for learning that are distinct from the classroom environment.

Quality afterschool programs bring together community resources that expose children to a level of experiential learning that is not easily obtainable in the daily classroom environment with all the other demands put on formal education. Out-of-school time (OST) programs provide children both the opportunity and experience to "try on" or "sample" or "explore" various interests that they are not exposed to in school and at the same time see firsthand the relevance of what they are learning in school and what interests and careers they might pursue after graduation.

Quality OST programs also give children the opportunity to explore their own uniqueness and develop a self-confidence that school does not always afford them. Finding their "niche" in life and in school allows children to improve their performance in academic areas where they previously struggled.

Arizona lacks a clear, comprehensive policy addressing the long-term educational and development needs of our children that takes into consideration the natural synchronicity that exists between the formal school day and quality out-of-school time programs. Currently there are before and afterschool programs that are run by the schools; there are also afterschool programs run by community-based organizations using existing school facilities; and there are afterschool programs that are run by community-based programs at independent locations. In reality, there is little intentional programming that partners directly with the schools that children attend for the purpose of addressing and meeting our children's needs. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers, which are funded by the federal Department of Education, are a notable exception.

The Arizona Center for Afterschool Excellence, a non-profit advocacy organization for the expansion of quality afterschool programs for all Arizona's children, is committed to facilitating a statewide conversation that will hopefully lead to the adoption of and support of a comprehensive policy to benefit both our children and our schools.

In March, the Arizona Center for Afterschool Excellence convened the first Arizona Mayoral Summit on Afterschool/Extended Learning with 100 education, business and community leaders. The summit, hosted by the Arizona Center for Afterschool Excellence, Tucson Mayor Robert Walkup, Tempe Mayor Hugh Hallman and Flagstaff Mayor Sara Presler with support from the National League of Cities' Youth Education and Families Institute, began identifying key priorities and strategies for increasing afterschool availability and accessibility, supporting afterschool program quality and using afterschool programs to increase students' workforce readiness skills.

Summit participants concluded that to be effective, a statewide afterschool strategy requires

- strong leadership and a commitment to change,

- the completion of a statewide community needs assessment,
- an expanded partnership between schools and municipalities,
- engaged partnerships including youth representation,
- more effective collaboration between schools and out-of-school time providers and
- creating a larger pool of qualified personnel to staff out-of-school time programs.

Following the mayoral summit, the Arizona Center for Afterschool Excellence began a partnership with the Valley of the Sun United Way to develop an Out-of-School Time Network Action Agenda for Maricopa County. Funded by a United Way Worldwide grant, the OST Network Action Agenda is designed to expand access for youth and families in out-of-school time programs, increase coordination among out-of-school time providers, school and community resources, and actively engage out-of-school time providers in post-secondary readiness strategies in the community.

Using the Forum for Youth Investment's Ready by 21 approach to build on and coordinate existing efforts to improve the outcomes of young people, the OST Network Action Agenda is being developed by a diversity of policymakers, school administrators, programs directors, business leaders and parent representatives led by Dr. Kent Scribner, superintendent of the Phoenix Union High School District. The hope is that what is learned in adopting and implementing an OST action agenda in Maricopa County will lead to similar efforts being replicated in other counties which, in turn, will lead to major statewide systemic changes in how Arizona educates and cares for its children.

Ultimately, if Arizona is to be successful in raising and educating children with the academic and life skills required to be successful in school, work and life, we need to elect policymakers at the local, state and national level that understand and are committed to serving and meeting the needs of our children. We need policymakers that understand our children are tomorrow's workforce, voters and community leaders. We need policymakers that will understand how to grow and develop the state economically without throwing our children's education under the school bus in order to balance the state budget. To that end, the Arizona Center for Afterschool Excellence will work with partners statewide to conduct an afterschool awareness campaign for Arizona candidates running for key state and congressional positions highlighting both the need for and value of quality afterschool programming as a critically needed piece of the education reform puzzle.

The Arizona School Boards Association, its partner school districts and superintendents must be major players in promoting and designing new statewide policies for our children. We all must work to elect leaders who will adopt and fund the policies that will finally establish Arizona as an education success story and national leader. ■

About the writer: Melanie McClintock is the executive director of the Arizona Center for Afterschool Excellence. Learn more at www.azafterschool.org.